DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 023 SO 028 578

AUTHOR Merz, Carol
TITLE Modern Notions of Community.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizen Participation; *Citizenship; Citizenship Education; Civics; *Community; Community Change; Community Involvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Modern History; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the changing definitions of "community" as addressed in the research literature. Beginning with Tocqueville's description of individuality in the United States, the paper identifies the following designations for the term "community": (1) "Modern Communitarians"; (2) "Communities of Memory"; and (3) "Moral Commitment and Responsibility." The paper also addresses critical views of the problems of power and difference by examining "Communities of Choice" and "Communities and Otherness." The paper reviews the role of civic life and discusses thinkers, such as Arthur Schlesinger, advocating a new covenant and those seeing conflict and ambiguity in developing modern identities. The paper concludes with challenging questions regarding the roles of school in developing community and outlines the social mission of the school to aid students in community participation. (Contains 30 references.) (EH)

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Modern Notions of Community

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CAROL MERZ

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Paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago Illinois, March 1997. This paper is adapted from Community and School: Promise and Paradox, by Carol Merz and Gail Furman, Teachers College Press, 1997.

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> The American dream is often a very private dream of being the star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out from the crowd of ordinary folk who don't know how. And since we have believed in the dream for a long time and worked very hard to make it come true, it is hard for us to give it up, even though it contradicts another dream we have – that of living in a society that would really be worth living in. (Bellah, p.285)

Writers in a number of fields have been turning their attention increasingly to issues of community. Regardless of discipline, they find an increasing need for belonging and connectedness that comes from knowing one's community, on the other hand, they find that we are pursuing with equal vigor, ends that lead to rootlessness and isolation.

Education writers (Crowson, 1992; Crowson and Boyd, 1993; Lutz and Iannacone, 1978; Lutz and Merz, 1992; Merz and Furman, 1997) have turned to the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft analysis to look at community in schools. This has proved to be a fruitful analytic tool, giving a sound definition of traditional community against which we can measure modern life. But in general, education writers have leaped from this analysis to simply looking at how we can become more gemeinschaftlich without really analyzing the American character, modern issues of power, or the place of schools among modern social institutions. Writers outside the field of education have, in general, indicated some tasks they think schools should accomplish, without realizing that schools are as much a result of the issues they analyze as are any other modern institution. This paper is an attempt to bridge this gap, bringing the work of some of these other writers into the discussion of community and schools.

One of the themes that asserts itself over and over in modern writing on community is the tension between the American ideal of the individual and the need to

live with other people, as exemplified by Bellah above. This notion is not new and was perhaps first described by Tocqueville (1835/1945) as he described Americans of another century. What seem to be new are the conditions of life today which make bonding in groups more tenuous than ever before in our history.

Social historians will recognize that the loss of intimate group life to increasingly complex bureaucracy has been a prominent theme at least since the beginning of the industrial revolution (e.g., Bender, 1978; Lockridge, 1970). Those who have placed this theme in the sociological framework of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, devised in the 19th century by Tönnies (1887/1957) and have noted that the world apparently becomes increasingly gesellschaftlich. For many, this tendency seemed inevitable, but despite the prevailing loss of village life, a number of writers have looked at ways folklife or Gemeinschaft reasserts itself. Redfield (1950, 1955) and Lewis (1951) looked at villages that were adopting urban lifestyles and noted that they retained many of their folkways. Gans (1962) and Fischer (1982) looked at modern urban and suburban groups and noted that they exhibited many folk characteristics. It appears that no matter how complex our world gets, the need for human connectedness and belonging is strong, and people have figured out ways to meet that need.

Even sociologists who formed many of our modern notions of bureaucracy found that the rules which defined the bureaucracy were often compromised by individuals in personal ways. Parsons (1937) pointed out that within the bureaucracy of business, patterns of communication and loyalty often follow lines of cliques. He saw individuals in bureaucracies as often being torn between individual friendships and the norms of the institution. Blau (1974), in his classic work on bureaucracy, agreed with the position that Parsons took regarding the existence of personal relationships within the bureaucratic workplace. He thought that Weber's dichotomy between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, which was much like that of Tönnies', was too extreme. In his study of work groups, he

pointed out ways in which the informal organization (gemeinschaftlich in nature) enabled the Gesellschaft or formal organization to work.

A number of contemporary writers, in dealing with issues of community today, recognize modern life so mitigates against the formation of community that we may be reaching a point at which it may no longer be possible to form communities. They ask if the groups we form today are too transient, too loose, or too instrumental to be classified as communities. Some see ways in which community might be reestablished to take into account the complexity and breadth of life that seems inevitable in the late twentieth century. As in the early communitarian movement that saw how modern communication might link people in profound ways, some people today see technology as enabling community not bound by space. Still others see choice as an important feature of modern community, and one of the ways in which we can narrow the number of contacts we make in our lives in order to focus on a few important and intimate bonds. All of these writers wrestle with the problem of commitment and stability. If we are free to choose our associates at will, and we have a great number of options available, how can we build community that is stable and reliable, gives us a sense of belonging, and allows us to socialize our youth and order our lives?

These writers are not easy to categorize having many common and overlapping themes. One group could be called loosely the "modern communitarians", including such writers as Bellah (1985) and Etzioni (1993) and, more recently, Himmelfarb (1994) and Fukuyama (1995). They say that our survival and well-being depend on reinstituting some aspects of traditional community in modern life. A second group, which is made of people who have historically been denied power in the traditional community, yet have strong beliefs in the necessity of social groupings could be called the "critical communitarians" Some of these writers come from a feminist tradition, including Friedman (1982) and Young (1986), and say that traditional community is too restrictive; modern concepts must be broadened in certain ways to include a wider range of

individuals. West (1993) could also be grouped with these writers as he looks at issues of community and race.

Writers may be analyzed by the relationship they see between power and values. Some writers, the ones I have loosely categorized as modern communitarians, are primarily interested in reestablishing a strong set of morals and notions of virtue, and deal with community as the traditional vehicle for doing this. The critics, including most of the feminists, come from a Marxist tradition and are interested in social organization and power. They see common values, morals, and virtues as derivative from the existing social organization and its power structure. Both groups wrestle with the problem of diversity in modern America and the difficulty of a common set of values. While these writers only deal with schools parenthetically, they examine community in light of late twentieth century phenomena and may help us develop a more realistic concept of community as it pertains to schools.

Yet other writers such as Sandal (1996), Putnam (1995), and Lipset (1996) write about the deep-seated conflict between the individual and community as it has been expressed in American civic philosophy. They point out aspects of modern life that make this conflict increasingly difficult to negotiate or reconcile and suggest that as modern American, we must learn to live with the conflict. This body of literature has important implications for schools as we look at the role of schools in shaping civic life. Our curriculum and the organization of our schools are both results of these dilemmas and can play an important role in dealing with them. These writers raise questions implicitly and explicitly about whether it is the role of the school to teach modern Americans how to live as citizens within this ambiguity and conflict.

Modern Communitarians

A number of writers have recently pointed out how segmented American society has become, and in fact have asked if our country can continue to exist at any level of unification. These writers all advocate to some extent that a common belief system or

code must unite all segments of our society if we are to continue. Himmelfarb (1994) and Etzioni (1993) chastise Americans for lack of a coherent system of morals. Schlesinger (1992), Sandel (1996), and Elshtain (1995) point out that the lack of a unifying civic belief system threatens the continuation of the United States as a democracy. All of these writers to some extent and for various reasons say that we have become overly concerned with the welfare of the individual at the expense of the welfare of society as a whole.

Several have turned their attention to Tocqueville's (1835/1945) keen insights into Americans' character and society. Tocqueville, a Frenchman who traveled widely in 19th century America to compare democracy here with democracy as it was emerging in Europe. He was particularly interested in the balance between a cohesive society and the individualism which he saw as such an important part of the American character, and he warned that the strong notion of individualism could eventually lead to an isolation of individuals, threatening American democratic society. Tocqueville saw that Americans balanced individualism and society through family life, religious beliefs, and a unique tendency to form voluntary civic groups. He thought that this "art of association" (vol. 2, p. 118) not only gave hope to the isolating tendencies of the American character, but that it was through these groups that Americans were able to form a participatory democracy. Bellah (1985), Fukuyama (1995), and Putnam (1995) have all noted that Americans today are abandoning the many organizations that have characterized our society in the past. They see that these civic groups are the main vehicles Americans used for bridging the gap between the individual and society. Fukuyama suggests that this abandonment of voluntary associations is in large part responsible for the decline in social capital in America and leaves our society suspicious of others and overwhelmed by our individualism. A similar point is made by Putnam who thinks that Americans' tendency to abandon voluntary associations in favor of isolating activities as a major desocializing force today. Similarly, Drucker (1994) posits that social service organizations will become a third large sector similar to the private and public sectors. He predicts that this

social sector, made up of large hospitals, non-profit organizations, mega-churches, and so forth, will do the work that has traditionally been done by the community.

Communities of Memory

Robert Bellah, in Habits of the Heart (1985), a term he takes from Tocqueville, explores the struggle in America between individualism and commitment to others. He suggests that balance between public and private aspects of life is key to the survival of modern society, and he studied the way these factors work in the lives of representative people. Bellah seems to find a unique combination of commitments among his subjects. For each "the touchstones of truth and goodness lie in individual experience and intimate relations" (p. 250) He mentions several types of communities which meet this need in his subjects as he notes that " people develop loyalties to others in the context of families, small communities, religious congregations and lifestyle enclaves"(p. 250). He also found that people had a strong identity to the United States as a national community, and expected to be able to serve and connect in the public sphere.

One of the ways Bellah's subjects connected to the larger sphere was through civic organizations. Again from Tocqueville, he notes the tendency of Americans to join groups of all kinds in order to achieve social or political ends. As mentioned earlier, Tocqueville wrote extensively about this tendency of Americans; Bellah saw these small, intermediate civic groups as an important bridge between the individual and the larger society. This is a theme that we will pick up again in other writers and note its relevance to schools.

Bellah noted several problems in the way his subjects related to others that are exacerbated by the mobility and diversity in modern life. The public connection appeared to be fragile and fall victim to frustration and burnout when people moved or the local scene changed. Bellah suggests that Americans have a fear of not being able to relate to

people who are too different which leads to the "tremendous nostalgia many Americans have for the small town" (p. 251).

Bellah offers a definition of community. He speaks of "real communities" as "communities of memory" which are "constituted by their past" (p.153). In telling the stories of a community, members develop coherence and identity. He notes the difficulty of neighborhoods or locations being communities of memory because of Americans geographic mobility. Yet "without history and hope, community means only the gathering of the similar," (p.154) what he calls lifestyle enclaves. He says the longing for the idealized small town is really a longing for meaning and coherence. He points out the emptiness of unfettered individualism and suggests that it leads to a culture of separation, as feared by Tocqueville. Like Elshtain (1995) and Schleshinger (1992), Bellah calls for a new culture of coherence, in which we think about our traditions that give meaning to our lives, as in our communities of memory. He thinks that only this way can we restore America's belief in democracy and the political system.

Moral Commitment and Responsibility

The strongest communitarian voice in modern America is Amitai Etzioni (1993), one of the founders of the modern communitarian movement. He speaks in passionate terms of bringing about moral reconstruction based on family and schools that teach a moral tradition. Etzioni decries a modern America in which people are too concerned with rights at the expense of responsibilities. He makes specific recommendations concerning schools - that morals be taught explicitly, that students be required to perform public service, an that schools be set up in such a way as to promote bonding between student and teacher, perhaps having longer and fewer instructional periods each day in high school, or making each high school teacher teach several subjects to the same group of students.

Etzioni mentions Tönnies conceptual framework of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft taking the common, but too narrow, view that writers of that era all saw Gemeinschaft as primitive and repressive. While recognizing that traditional small town Gemeinschaft cannot be reconstructed today, Etzioni attempts to show communities that can take into account the nature of modern life by recognizing non-geographic communities, such as work-communities. He also recognizes that traditional communities were homogeneous and new communities have to find a way to accommodate diversity. He suggests that communities today must begin at the level of the family and be reinforced at increasingly broad levels like "Chinese nesting boxes" (p. 32). In this way smaller homogeneous subcommunities group themselves into a larger social web. He feels that these communities can all agree on a basic set of morals while varying in other ways. Calling for a "new Gemeinschaft that would be neither repressive or hierarchical" (p.122), he sees American society accommodating diverse sub communities by being a kind of "supracommunity - a community of communities" (p. 160).

Etzioni assumes that most Americans share a unifying set of core values and fails to deal with how to reconcile deeply held differences. He ultimately leaves his readers to decide which are the shared values and which are the separate identifying values. The values which are generally shared are often vague; it is values of the second type, unique to a smaller group, that are more typical of real communities and lead to greater separation.

Etzioni is really pleading for a strengthening of the moral commitment of Americans, and uses the term community as a vehicle. In his movement, people sign on to a manifesto of principles regarding responsibility to others. This differs to a great extent from traditional Gemeinschaft, because the bond in a traditional Gemeinschaft was a naturally occurring phenomenon between people who were linked by kinship, ethnicity, geography, and so forth. It was not a matter of choice - no manifesto was necessary. Etzioni attempts to make a case that people should feel a commitment to others, namely

American society at large, and this is problematic. People do not feel natural bonds to anonymous "others" especially people as different from each other as exist in American society today. To create such a bond, Etzioni argues, is in people's best interest, but this commitment begins to take on the contractual nature of a Gesellschaft. It is really like the code of behavior that comes from such legal sources as the Constitution. Etzioni could make his case equally well by simply stressing that legal structures today have become too concerned with rights at the expense of responsibilities, and could advocate remedies by restructuring laws.

Critical Views: Problems of Power and Difference

Criticism of reestablishing Gemeinschaft often comes from those groups of people who were constrained in traditional communities. The strong sense of identity in a Gemeinschaft often came at the cost of excluding others - a sense of "our people" involved identifying a group of people who are not "like us." Stability of role definition within a Gemeinschaft also led people who were in subordinate roles, or roles that they perceived as subordinate, to object to traditional community. The goals of justice and equality in America inevitably come into conflict with the exclusionary aspect of gemeinscaft. This can be handled in several ways, but each has its problems. Different communities of equal standing can exist, but as we have seen over and over, power is not equally distributed, and communities differ widely in their power and wealth. The community can be defined so broadly as to include everyone thus losing the identity function of community, or Etzioni's idea of sub communities within a supra community as Chinese nesting boxes, with congruent value systems.

Feminist writers have also been interested in community and the "socially defined self." They share the communitarians concern that individualism has become too dominant a theme in today's world, perhaps to the point of destroying our social

connections. On the other hand, they are concerned that modern communitarians' focus on family and neighborhood will be restrictive to women. We will examine two feminists writers as examples of people who see the value in the connectedness of community but object to the exclusionary nature or restrictive nature of traditional roles.

Communities of Choice

Based on the work of Gilligan, Marilyn Friedman suggests that women seek connections with others as an end in itself, while men affiliate in order to accomplish some other end. This theme bears a striking resemblance to Tönnies original conception of Gemeinschaft as feminine and Gesellschaft as masculine. In fact, Friedman criticizes the communitarians for "providing no basis for regarding the nurturant, relational self as morally superior to those who are highly individualistic" (p.148). She further questions communitarians in their call for communities to make moral claims on their members, without any apparent ability to avoid practices that might be exclusionary or suppressive. Finally she questions the communitarian notion that community is a connection one discovers rather than chooses.

Friedman notes that today people are involved simultaneously in a number of communities, and suggests a model for "communities of choice" patterned after women's friendships and urban social networks. She suggests that they are a better model for community in that friendships are voluntary, express deep commitment from the social self, and can accommodate the multiplicity of relationships required by modern urban living. Friedman admits that these communities often have no common history, such as described by Bellah's "community of memory," and she recognizes that children and elderly people cannot depend on a community in which members are free to leave at will. Thus Friedman deals successfully with the issues of choice and diversity, but fails to address the issue of stability. Communities of choice are always vulnerable to members moving or choosing to emphasize different interests or aspects of their identity, and

forming new patterns of association. While she gives examples of voluntary associations which serve to define the self, these are often associations of people who feel excluded from society in general, such as ethnic groups or lesbian groups. She has no real mechanism otherwise for differentiating a community that meets a deep seated need for belonging from a affinity group that is merely formed for recreation or convenience.

Communities and Otherness

Iris Marion Young (1986) deals explicitly with the deep, identity giving nature of community. She suggests that much of the identity of community comes from excluding certain others, that community by most communitarian standards requires an understanding and shared subjectivity among members such that the boundary between community members disappears. This is only possible with people who are very alike, and this defining quality makes community among people who are very different, quite impossible. She further questions the requirement that community be based on face-to-face or unmediated relations. She feels that such ideas of community are "both wildly utopian and undesirable" (p. 18). Ultimately she abandons the word community with these aforementioned connotations and meanings and calls for "social relationships that embody openness to unassimilated otherness with justice and appreciation" (p. 23). Young, like Friedman, sees a model for modern relationships in the complexity of urban life. In a city, strangers share space for commercial, social, or aesthetic purposes; people experience the ethnicity or customs of others without adopting them as their own. Thus in describing the ways groups might coexist to gain certain benefits, Young echoes much original social contract theory and may have brought us full circle in differentiating between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Indeed her "social relationships of unassimilated otherness", in which groups interact for mutually advantage, is essentially Gesellschaft, as defined by Tönnies.

The Role of Civic Life

Several modern writers have dealt explicitly with the lack of a unifying civic belief system in America today. While Etzioni assumed that Americans are unified at some very basic level, other writers say that we find more identity in the belief systems that divide us than those that unite us. In addressing these conflicting loyalties and identities, Elshtain and Shlesinger call us to develop a new, unifying covenant, and Sandel asks that we learn to live with the ambiguity of multiple and conflicting levels of loyalty. Others such as Lipset, Sandal, and Putnam, say our traditional American beliefs are so firmly planted in individualism that we have little hope of recovering community as we knew it in the past.

Advocates of a New Covenant

In his Disuniting of America, Arthur Schlesinger (1992) states that the lack of a unifying American identity is "the culmination of the cult of ethnicity" (p. 119). He sees that America has always struggled with the differences of ethnic groups and that recently groups have misstated history and misused the schools in an attempt to secure their own identity at the expense of nation. While he urges us to a better balance of pluribus and unum and scolds ethnic groups for these self-centered actions, he gives little guidance in how we might handle the problems of difference and power.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, who also advocates a new covenant, deals explicitly with the problems of difference and power, as she explores the relationship of public and private lives, specifically along gender lines. In Daughters of Antigone (1982) she looked at the question of conflicting loyalties to family and to the state, which she originally casts as a conflict for women, but could as easily be seen as a Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft conflict. In her more recent book, Democracy on Trial (1995), she calls explicitly for a new social covenant to restore the civil society that seems to be disintegrating today. Elshtain points out, as do Fukuyama and Putnam, that Americans seem unable or unwilling to form the civic and social associations which Tocqueville said was necessary

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to maintain our form of democracy. Fukuyama describes these institutions, as the bridge between the family and larger society. Elshtain calls these "mediating institutions" between the individual and the state; she describes how traditionally a child was nested in a family, the family in turn was

> "nested within a wider, overlapping framework of sustaining and supporting civic institutions: churches, schools and solidaristic association such as unions or mother's associations. American society was honeycombed by a vast network that offered a densely textured social ecology for the growing citizen." (p.5-6)

Elshtain concludes that, despite American's traditionally anti-state tendency, today we find ourselves asking the state to hold us together in the absence of these organizations.

Conflict and Ambiguity of Modern Identities

Putnam, in his provocative article "Bowling Alone (1995), points out, as does Elshtain, that the intermediate, civic organizations that bridged the gap between the individual and society are dramatically weakened today. As an example of the decline in social interaction, he discovered that between 1980 and 1993 the number of American bowlers increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent. The future of America may not depend on our ability to form bowling leagues, but the isolation of solo recreation is surely indicative our disconnectedness from our friends and neighbors. Putnam points out that face-to-face social clubs have been replaced by anonymous "mailing list" associations, such as AARP and the Sierra Club, in which people pay dues, and read newsletters, but never meet. Putnam calls for a reexamination of the loss of social capital created by the increasing preference for individualistic lives and calls on Americans to reverse this trend and rebuild social connectedness.

Similarly, Lipset (1996) points out that Americans have always been deeply suspicious of the concentration of power, rules, and authority. He points out that the

American tendency to value the individual over the state has a dark side and is responsible in some part for our high crime rate and moral decline today. He asks how we can be surprised by a climbing crime rate, when we have "distain of authority [and] for the rules set down by the state" (p.21). Americans express one of the highest levels of patriotism for their country, while paradoxically voting at one of the lowest rates in the world. His outlook for America is tempered by the overwhelming optimism he sees among Americans and their belief in "the American dream." While Lipset does one of the best jobs of explaining the social disconnectedness in today's world, he offers no ways to build better social bridges, not does he really seem to think it is necessary.

Like Elstain, Sandal (1996) considers the role of the state in giving identity to the individual and coherence to a community. He concludes somewhat differently than she that the "nation state," historically identified by a small, bounded geographic area, can no longer function in this role. Sandel traces the history of political power in America as an example of how nation states today are pressured internally and externally. Global economics and trade have important consequences everywhere, and no longer is a people's well-being determined only by their own laws and industry. Throughout the world nation-states are also threatened internally by smaller ethnic, geographic, or religious subgroups seeking individual identity and sovereignty.

Sandel concludes that today we cannot look to our nation-state as the unifying ideal that gives us security, identity, and a sense of well-being. We must recognize that simultaneously we are citizens of the world, a nation-state, various regional entities, and a multiplicity of ethnic, religious, or affinity groups. For Sandel "the civic virtue distinctive in our time is the capacity to negotiate our way through sometimes overlapping and conflicting obligations that lay claim to us and live with the tension to which multiple loyalties give rise" (p.74). Thus Sandal suggests that people must adapt to the nature of the world today rather than trying to redirect the course of society to meet the way people have been.

Sandal suggests that "such politics demands citizens who can abide the ambiguity associated with divided sovereignty, who can think and act as multiply situated selves" (p.74). In these suggestions, perhaps more than anywhere, do we begin to see an answer consistent with the Gemeinshaft - Gesellschaft analysis. In fact we belong to groups that are at various places on the continuum, and each group to which we belong may have characteristics from several places on the continuum at the same time.

Conclusion

This discussion brings us to a point where we see that there are several things missing in our lives today because of loss of community in the traditional, gemeinschaftlich sense. Among these are lacks in a sense of belonging, social monitoring, traditional socialization of youth, and the ability to take care of people's needs in an immediate way.

There are several other aspects of modern life which may preclude, or might be precluded by, traditional community, that is community that is face-to-face,. stable, non-instrumental and characterized by non-specific relationships. Among the qualities that might work against this kind of community are geographic mobility, role specialization, choice, and the notion of equality of individuals. These are aspects of our lives that are generally valued a[illegible] which we might not be willing to give up.

Traditionally there have been intermediate organizations in America that bridged between the family and society. But schools may be one of the few vestiges of this group of organizations as we tend to turn over more and more of our social and civic responsibility to the state or large bureaucratic organizations.

With such changes in intermediate organizations, we must ask a series of questions about schools:

- What roles do schools play in this time of changing social expectations?
- Do schools alone bear responsibility for socializing the individual to the larger society?

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- Are schools expected to give a sense of self-identity and belonging?
- Are schools alone the vehicle by which children learn the ways they are similar to and different from others?

Contemplating what modern writers say about the importance and the difficulty of forming community today, we must conclude that regardless of the answers to these questions, the social mission of the school must include the following tasks:

- to teach students to live satisfying lives as participants in groups at different levels
- to learn to live and work in groups in which differences are accepted and respected
- to learn to form groups that provide satisfaction, identity and security without destroying the choices and opportunities for others.

These tasks require us to rethink our relationships with students, parents and other professionals. We must think about our curriculum and the way we organize our schools. We must be willing to confront issues of power and justice. We probably do not know how to do this in schools today. But we believe that schools can be better aspects of our larger communities and can be better communities in themselves. We need to continue to explore small schools and intimate settings. We need to look at schools that are willing to negotiate their program with parents and share decision-making power in other meaningful ways. We need to identify and study schools that seem to be establishing meaningful social connections for children. Above all we must be cognizant of those aspects of our lives that give them coherence and meaning.

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